World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

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United Nations

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UN WEBSITE VISITED BY MILLIONS

The United Nations website on the Internet World Wide Web (www.un.org) displays up-to-date and detailed information about the work of the organization. Average current accesses are approximately 6 million per week originating from 148 countries. The Information Technology Section of the Department of Public Information is responsible for the organization, maintenance and enhancement of the UN website. In this edition of World Chronicle, Mahbub Ahmad, Chief of the UN's Information Technology Section and the UN's webmaster, talks about the contents of www.un.org, the UN home on the Internet.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

If you need up-to-date information on peace and security, international law, humanitarian affairs, human rights, and economic and social development, where do you find it? If you have a computer and are connected to the Internet you go to www.un.org, the homesite of the United Nations on the worldwide web. In addition to English, the UN website is available in the five other official languages of the UN -- Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian and Spanish. Every day, thousands of people around the world visit the UN website.

Our guest today is Chief of the United Nations Information Technology Section. He is Mahbub Ahmad, the UN's webmaster. Joining me to talk with Mr. Ahmad are Joe Lauria of *the Boston Globe* and Argemiro Ferreira of *Tribuna da Imprensa*.

Mr. Ahmad, welcome to World Chronicle.

AHMAD: Thank you for having me.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mahbub, the UN is accused of being rather slow in getting into computers and certainly getting on the Internet, why was the UN slow and why is it that now you're really moving ahead in leaps and bounds?

AHMAD: Well, it's interesting because the UN as you know, operates on a two-year budget cycle and that being the case it is quite difficult to predict what the level of technology will be in a few years' time. But I would say that when we went on the worldwide web on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Organization in 1995, the worldwide web was actually just starting up at the time. So we were somewhat near the cutting edge of the technology. I wouldn't say that we were cutting edge technology but since then we have grown in leaps and bounds primarily because there has been tremendous response from users out there. As an example, I would say that in 1996 we had a total yearly access of about 11 million visitors to the website.

LITTLEJOHNS: Now you have close to a million a day.

AHMAD: That's right. And last year we closed out at about 182 million. So the phenomenal growth that we have seen has also prompted us to try and do more on the worldwide web on the Internet web page.

LITTLEJOHNS: Now, who are these people who are visiting your site? Are they

government people, are they students, scholars, or do you know whether there is a huge body of the general public that's accessing?

AHMAD: We're doing a general analysis of the user patterns – who the users are and where they come from – and we find one very interesting phenomenon in that unlike many other sites the UN website is almost a 24-hour site. In other words, it gets accesses all 24 hours of the day in large numbers. So for example, the highest per hour access is only double of the lowest per hour. So it's not that at some hours of the night there are very few people accessing the website and at some hours during the day there are a large number of people. So it's a rolling 24-hour basis. And we find that users come from approximately, at the last time we did an analysis, about 143 countries. We get some accesses from almost every country that is served. Now one phenomenon that has also occurred is that, as you know, the large part of the audience is in North America, then followed by Europe. Japan has a large audience, Germany, Latin America. The developing countries get far less access primarily because I believe of access speeds and access to computers and technology.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about large countries like China, India, the other countries of the sub-continent?

AHMAD: China is gaining in the number of accesses that we get especially after we introduced the Chinese language website that was towards the end of 1998. As far as India is concerned, we do get a large number of accesses from India. But one thing that is important to realize is that while we count the number of people actually accessing the website these numbers don't really tell the truth. There are far more people who are accessing the website through cached servers. In other words, in distant places the service providers will actually store these pages on their local servers so that the users don't have to go all the way to the originating server to get the pages. So we don't get a count of that. So there are many areas which have actually stored large parts of the UN website for their local use. There's a school system in Singapore which has asked to mirror a part of the UN website, which is the Cyber School Bus. And there are other areas.

LITTLEJOHNS: So are you saying that 200 million a year might only be a drop in the bucket?

AHMAD: I wouldn't really go that far as saying it's a drop in the bucket but it does not reflect the actual usage.

LITTLEJOHNS: Could it be twice as much?

AHMAD: Could be twice as much. Another point to remember is that these are, what we call raw accesses. In other words, total hits to the page, total numbers of files that were served. When we look at actual page views there are far less, which means how many people have actually looked at a full page; that comes for our website. We have a very good ratio for that. It comes to approximately 250,000 pages a day which is roughly a quarter of the total accesses. This is interesting because normally many pages that you see on the current worldwide web have lots of graphics and each graphic counts as a hit. So when we see that we served 250,000 page views, it implies that our pages contain fewer graphics. Ours is a text-heavy website. We do not want to put lots of graphics and fancy, what people call, "eye candy" because access speeds in large parts of the world are slower and we want most people to be able to use it without having to go through download times.

LAURIA: When Chaim, the Executive Producer of the show, invited me to come on this programme I was quite eager to do it because I've had very many frustrations in dealing with the UN web page. I though I was alone with that but just a few days ago, here at Headquarters, there was a press conference on members of the panel the Secretary-General appointed to look into this issue, in conjunction with the Millennium Summit. And the chairman of the panel, José Marie Figueres, also the former President of Costa Rica, said and I quote: "It's disturbing to say the least". And what he was referring to was using the UN website. One of his criticisms was that it's badly organized and lack basic statistics for research but I have had many difficulties navigating the web. I have to say that given the number of hits that you say it gets every day the server is really good because there's not a lot of waiting time for the pages to come up but to know how to get to those pages is quite another matter. I'm not sure where to begin but let's talk about –

LITTLEJOHNS: www.un.org

LAURIA: Well, the URL is pretty good. I'm surprised no one else had bought that domain name beforehand. To get to www.un.org is easy but how do you get to see the UN press briefing every day? I spent just this morning going through seven pages going around in circles trying to get there because I clicked on audio-visual. You don't get it that way, do you?

AHMAD: Actually, the press briefing is available right from where the general news area is, the news page. When you click on UN News Centre the press briefing is right there. The audio-visual area has a section on webcast and we have the Daily Noon Briefing

available from there. But at times there would be problems because we are providing this on the basis of a pro bono service that we are getting from the service provider. The UN currently does not have on its own the technical capability to stream audio-video live. We do provide canned, so to say, programmes for radio and news.

LAURIA: You won't be able to show us on the screen if you click on audio visual how you get there because ...

AHMAD: Unfortunately no, but I think I would be able to show you a little bit from the main UN news page of a website page. If you click on News Centre this is what you would get and if you look at the upper left, you find the press briefings and that's where you would get .....

LITTLEJOHNS: Press rooms ...

AHMAD: Press rooms and the press briefing

LAURIA: So you have to go through three or four pages and it's not for audio-visual. The other problem I have is the search engine. Coming up to the NPT Conference I thought I would save myself time by running an NPT and what came up were press releases from 1998 and nothing later than that and it had nothing to do with the current NPT Review Conference. What's the story on the search engine?

AHMAD: I agree with you completely. We're working on our search engine. We're looking at about three or four different search engines at this time. The difficulty is the search engine that we are currently using was one of the original search engines that we put up when this site was set up. That is no longer supported by the vendor and we're looking at the newer search engines. Technology has developed tremendously over the course of the past few years and so we're trying to keep up with the technology and trying to keep up with whatever we can get to improve the searches. I would say by the end of this year you would see a far more robust search capability. Basically, you would be able to put in almost anything you wish and you would get -- relevant hits.

FERREIRA: Mr. Ahmad, I can't understand why there are only six official languages in the United Nations but I would like to question why you don't have other website versions beyond those six. My country, Brazil, has 160 million people and they all speak Portuguese. We practically don't have dialects and other languages. Brazil, I presume, should be one of the good targets for your website but hardly in English, French, Chinese, Russian, Arabic or even Spanish that is only slightly similar to Portuguese. Only a tiny percentage of the

Brazilian population can speak any of these six official languages. And as you know, Portuguese is spoken in Brazil and also in other countries in Europe, Africa and Asia and it's among the most spoken language in the world. That's why I would like to know about your plans concerning a Portuguese version and maybe other versions as well.

AHMAD: I'm very glad you asked that question because I'm very happy to tell you that there is indeed a small version of the UN information available in Portuguese. This was developed locally by our Information Centre in Lisbon and it has a lot of material in Portuguese which has been translated and is available through our Information Centres from the Main Page if you go through UN around the World and look at Information Centres. The Information Centre in Lisbon has the page in Portuguese. There are a number of other Information Centres which have been able, through their own initiatives, to provide pages in their local language so we are getting there.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Mahbub Ahmad, Chief of the United Nations Information Technology Section.

Mahbub, the point that Argemiro makes about Portuguese, I think, is very valid and you've responded to it. But the Japanese are not exactly famous for their command of other languages and there is a large, highly developed, technological audience in Japan. Is there any chance you might be doing something in Japanese?

AHMAD: Again, I must say that I'm very glad you asked that question because our Information Centre in Tokyo has indeed come up with a web page in Japanese for Japanese- speaking audiences. It is small because of the limitations that they have on staffing and funding but it is being improved on and there are a lot of things which are available on that site in Japanese.

LITTLEJOHNS: What is your record in hits for Japan at the moment?

AHMAD: I'm afraid I won't be able to tell you that but from Japan itself we get roughly for the main website, I would think, probably about 8 to 10 percent of our accesses.

LITTLEJOHNS: Really?

AHMAD: Yes.

LAURIA: Have you had any experiences with countries blocking, like China has blocked some UN websites? And this was information by governments, or the UN, that might be contrary to some Chinese policy such as human rights. Have you seen any evidence of that?

AHMAD: No, we haven't seen any evidence.

LAURIA: Do you think this is an opportunity then for information to get into a country like China that the government of China would not want to be seen?

AHMAD: It could be.

LAURIA: How do you think the web has changed the work of the Organization in five years? What have you learned about that?

AHMAD: I think it has been very beneficial in the sense that there is now a lot more collaboration between different offices, different entities of the UN system in creating a joint website or creating joint information. For example, whenever there are any conferences that are held we have a joint action by the various substantive offices in preparing the information and putting it on the website. One recent example has been – I will show you – the launch of the Secretary-General's Millennium Report. We put this up in six languages on the 3rd of April and we were together with the originating office, the Office of Conference Services which prepares the document, our office which formats it, and the distribution mechanism. So everyone worked together to put this out on the web, in print and for the distribution process.

LAURIA: On that point, the former President of Costa Rica pointed out -- made these criticisms that UNDP, UNICEF they all have their separate websites and there aren't links from the main web page. Is that true?

AHMAD: No, that is not true. We have what is so-called the UN System Locator which is on UN Around the World. That has an alphabetical listing of every single website that any entity in the UN operates.

LAURIA: Is that on the home page?

AHMAD: That is directly from the home page. You go click on UN Around the World and the second item there is UN System Locator and it takes you to a alphabetical listing. And you could also get it by theme. So I would say that we have links to a lot of entities. There's another area on our website which we have recently added and that is the Civil Society and UN in Business area. Under the Civil Society area, we have grouped the major issues that the UN deals with – disarmament, children, health, environment, and so on. All of these issues are grouped under themes and under each theme you have every single UN entity that deals with that theme has a connection to their relevant page. So it is a collection by theme. So you could get as much information as you would need from that

area.

FERREIRA: Mr. Ahmad, the UN website tells the public questions and comments on the work of the United Nations so I presume you're getting some feedback. Could you share with us those reactions you have been getting from the Internet surfers and how are you handling them?

AHMAD: It's very hard to respond to the many requests that we get. There are many areas on the website from which responses are requested, comments are requested. The main comment area from the website is what we have through our feedback area from the main home page. We get approximately 5,000 letters or e-mail messages a month in there. They are of general nature. A lot of it says they have found something interesting, a lot of them say they have not found something interesting or they would like to know where they can find more information. And it's interesting because not all of that information is relevant for the UN website itself and so we have to refer them to the various agencies and various programmes and actually point them in the right direction. But one of the areas where we've been able to work with is the many suggestions that we have gotten from the users. They have been extremely useful and I think that has been one of the mainstays of making improvements on the website that we have been able to do so far.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mahbub, do you have any problem with hackers?

AHMAD: Not really, except a year or so ago. I think there was a time when there was some form of – I really would not call it an attack – but some form of blockage in the sense that there were too many requests coming in from one particular site. But that lasted for just a few minutes and that was it.

LAURIA: To go back to some troubles I've had. I was trying to find out when Mexico was last on the Security Council. I don't think that's anywhere on your site. Or any country when they served that's not there in the Security Council page. Another one is I went to the Dag Hammarskjold Library link and I looked at all the electronic databases available to your desktop and most of them seem like they're only for staff. Is that correct? Can outsiders can't get access to these things?

AHMAD: Outsiders will get access to what is called the "UNBISNET" which is the United Nations Bibliographic Information System Net and that is in the works. And I believe that it should be in the next few days actually. It combines all of the information in terms of records of Security Council meetings or General Assembly meetings or parliamentary

proceedings and in general it is a compendium of information that can be used to locate records of ....

LAURIA: How far back do those resolutions go because while we deal with daily news here these historians maybe would like to use the site. And I notice that the Secretary-General reports only go back to 1992 and there only seems to be a small selection of them. GA resolutions back to 1980. Is there an effort going on to complete the database back to 1945 at some point?

AHMAD: We have all Security Council Resolutions right now.

LAURIA: From 1945?

AHMAD: From 1945. Every single Security Council resolution is on the website.

LAURIA: I mean Resolution Number 1?

AHMAD: Yes. Under the Documentation Centre. So we tried to tackle that first because that was more manageable. Now, as you know, there are far more General Assembly resolutions. We're taking them one at a time and as much as resources permit because our main difficulty is we have to try and see what we're going to do; whether we're going to expand the website and now with the request for these six official languages how much we will have to devote to each of the languages and how much we will have to do going backwards and putting all the other older materials ....

LAURIA: Quickly, how large is your staff and your budget?

AHMAD: Budget? Interesting question because it is only in this current budget that there have been some allocations, some new allocations. We got three new posts for the website. I have on my staff a total of 18 for the website. There are others who are working part-time in various offices and departments, in addition to their regular tasks, in creating the content.

FERREIRA: Mr. Ahmad, we know only a very small percentage of the world's population have access to computers and even less to the Internet. Maybe the only way for the rest of the world's population to have access to the UN website would be through public libraries I guess. Do you have problems to provide information to public libraries all over the world on how to connect to the UN website and its links?

AHMAD: As you know, the UN has depository libraries in many countries which house every single UN document that was put out and those libraries are instrumental in now converting their holdings into electronic format which can then be accessed by many more

people.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mahbub, reading some of the material for this programme I have somewhat mixed feelings as a journalist about some of the things that you guys are up to because it seems to me that if you go too far in this area that you've been talking about, you're going to put us out of jobs. You know, feeding all this stuff into our newsrooms and our various headquarters, which may or may not be New York, and editors are just going to say what the hell do we need correspondents at the UN for because we get all the material from the UN. And I noticed also that some of the top UN officials are in the business of writing pieces for the op-ed pages of the newspapers. So, you know, I can see the reason for doing it but it's counterproductive perhaps from our standpoint.

AHMAD: I can assure you that there is absolute no substitute for the person on the scene.

LITTLEJOHNS: Thank you for those kind words.

AHMAD: And that will always have to be there.

LAURIA: I take back all my negative remarks that I made to you today.

FERREIRA: Mr. Ahmad, the UN is famous for red tape and the vast production of papers and documents, how are computers and the Internet affecting or simplifying the whole bureaucracy and how is the website contributing to this?

AHMAD: Well, it's a situation where there is an explosion of information and it's not only that we were using a lot of paper but a lot of that paper has now been converted to electronic format. And as you would see it has become much easier, through the electronic medium, the website, to access documents which otherwise one would have to wait for a long time to get or have printed or try to find it from somewhere. But having electronic access has a number of advantages in the sense that it would let you get to the document faster, it would let you read the document without actually printing it out – so saving paper – and also we have the way of getting the information out faster and to a wider audience.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you have a printer-friendly arrangement so that you could move the cursor to something that says printer-friendly and then print it out and not have to go through all the graphics and whatever?

AHMAD: There are some areas of the website which are a little bit graphics-intensive where we have put that feature on so that you could just get a plain vanilla version. But on most of the pages we take great care to ensure that they print out right and there aren't

very many graphics on the actual information that you would want.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Ahmad, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Mahbub Ahmad, Chief of the United Nations Information Technology Section, Mr. Webmaster. He was interviewed by Joe Lauria of *The Boston Globe* and Argemiro Ferreira of *Tribuna da Imprensa*.

'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**

ANNOUNCER: Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827L, New York, N.Y., 10017.

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